Labour’s Policy Review

Speaking skills
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Young people must be able to communicate with confidence.

Labour made great strides in education in government. Through investment and reform we transformed the education landscape for the better. By the time we left office there were 42,000 more teachers than in 1997, helping our young people achieve some of the best ever exam results at every age. We built, rebuilt or refurbished over 3,000 schools. Through the Sure Start programme we delivered a children’s centre in every community – 3,500 in total – offering every child the best start in life. We made real progress both in educational outcomes and in narrowing the attainment gap between rich and poor children.

Labour will continue to hold the Tory-led Government to account for the damage it is doing to our education system - with cuts which go too far, too fast and policies which shift power away from parents and teachers into the hands of politicians at the centre. David Cameron’s programme is one which is for the few, not the many. At the same time, the Policy Review process provides us with an opportunity to consider how the education landscape is changing and to develop the policies to meet the challenges and opportunities of 2015.

One aspect of Labour’s approach will be reform to ensure that our education system can meet the needs of the new economy. It is clear that spoken communication skills (or ‘oracy’) are crucial, both in terms of child development and in meeting the needs of the labour market, and must be at heart of the education system. Labour will focus on offering policies that equip young people with the skills and confidence to realise their potential, embedding speaking skills throughout the education system is key to this.

The domestic and international evidence on speaking skills and the use of debating in schools shows that promoting these activities in the classroom has a positive effect on academic engagement and attainment. Debating and encouraging discussion also boosts the confidence of students, can help raise their aspirations and improve critical thinking skills. All these attributes are needed if we are to have young people ready to excel both in higher education and the workplace. Employers tell us they want articulate, confident employees, and universities tell us they want students who can think through arguments and present their thoughts persuasively. Our schools need to be encouraging these skills from an early age.
Ofsted has also found that debating and speaking skills can help boys stay engaged in education and contribute more actively in English lessons, and that debating is an effective way to stretch gifted and talented students, who thrive when given room to develop and present their own thoughts.

**Shadow Education Secretary Stephen Twigg:**

“If we are to break down the barriers that stop many young people succeeding, then we need an education system that teaches our children to be articulate and confident.

“Speaking skills have not had enough of a focus within state schools but it is clear this needs to change. We know that many private schools focus on debating and on interview coaching, helping their students get another leg up toward the best universities and jobs.

“Labour wants all pupils to have the same opportunities to develop their verbal communication and presentation skills. This is about modernising our schools system to improve life chances. Aligning the school curriculum with the needs of the modern labour market is essential.

“Young people get the best start when they can communicate with confidence.”
Why speaking skills matter

Young people are held back from reaching their potential when they are unable to articulate information and ideas and communicate effectively. Businesses, universities and parents have all raised the need for improvement of speaking skills in the education system. Increasingly, employers require effective spoken and communication skills, and surveys have shown them to be among the most valued skills in the modern workplace. High standards of oracy hold the key to getting a job or progressing through a university interview.

The Confederation of Business and Industry (CBI) has said that its members believe there is an urgent need to raise standards of speaking skills in the education system. According to its most recent annual Education and Skills Survey, the CBI reports that two-thirds of businesses believe that employability skills amongst young people in schools should be made a top priority. Essential to this is the ability of young people to articulate information and ideas amongst their peers and seniors, to be able to communicate an argument or point of view with clarity, and to extract and rehearse key pieces of information from a discussion.

A survey by the Chartered Institute for Management Accountants (CIMA) asked employers to review and score a list of 22 skills with respect to how important each skill is for a qualified accountant. The CIMA employers ranked verbal communication skills as the most important. However, when asked what skills recent university graduates possessed, verbal communication skills ranked 12 out of 22, indicating a gap in the employers’ expectations and student skill profiles.
Rigorous literacy and numeracy rightly remain at the heart of the school system. Traditionally, less importance has been placed on the spoken and communication skills required of labour markets and higher education.

Research shows increased spoken interaction during the early years stage is critical to developing a child’s cognitive abilities. Increased exposure to new vocabulary early on enhances development of speaking skills. Whilst this starts at home, schools have an important role to play.

According to the children’s language development charity I CAN, in socially deprived areas there can be more than 17 children in each class with language skills below their average age. Independent schools, where often debating is practiced with greater frequency, are disproportionately represented in national and international debating competitions.

We know that children from the private sector in education are disproportionately represented in elite universities and in white collar professions. A complex network of forces contributes to this and while there will be no one magic bullet to break this trend, equipping young people to be able to confidently and effectively articulate information and ideas is an important part of this jigsaw. Schools play a crucial role with many demonstrating excellent practice.
Speaking skills for a new economy

The business community and higher education sector have signalled the need to address speaking skills to better match the education system with the needs of the labour market

Katja Hall, Head of Policy at the CBI:

“Employers need staff to be able to, with confidence, articulate information in a clear and coherent way, to extract key details from conversations and to be ready to present a case to peers and colleagues. “Leaving compulsory education without adequate spoken and communication skills is a serious blight on young people’s lives and a major handicap when they’re looking for work, and if we do not fix this problem our economy will suffer.”

Speaking skills as a basis of child development

Virginia Beardshaw, Chief Executive or the children’s communication charity I CAN:

“Communication is the 21st century life skill - the foundation upon which children’s learning rests. If a child has not been supported in developing speech and language skills, they will have difficulty accessing education and will lack vital literacy and numeracy skills. And without good communication skills, young people will be unable to develop the soft skills such as team working, negotiation skills and the problem solving skills that employers require.

“Over one million children have long term problems with speech, language and communication. I CAN is calling for the introduction of a communication and language strategy to give this crucial focus on language and communication in education.”

Professor Robin Alexander, University of Cambridge:

“Talk has always been one of the essential tools of teaching, and the best teachers use it with flair. But talk is much more than an aid to effective teaching. Children, we now know, need to talk, and to experience a rich diet of spoken language, in order to think and learn. Reading, writing and numeracy may be the acknowledged curriculum ‘basics’, but talk is arguably the true foundation for learning.”
Developing this agenda

Labour is looking at how we could do things differently if we were in government. As part of our Policy Review we are looking at the following areas:

- A stronger focus on speaking skills to be embedded in a revised national curriculum.
- Additional training and development in speaking skills in initial teacher training and continued professional development for teachers.
- Strengthening language development teaching in children’s early years.
- A national debating competition in state schools across England to raise the profile of debate.

Case Studies: innovation in practice

**Paddington Academy**
Paddington Academy has a high proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and an above average number of children who speak English as a second language. Rated outstanding by Ofsted, the school places a great emphasis on developing the language skills of its young people, embedded across the school curriculum. Pupils are able to put their language skills into practice, participating in the pupil-led Enterprise Programme. This emphasis on developing young people to be articulate and confident will set them up for life in work.

**School21**
Opening in September 2012, School21 has designed and will pioneer an innovative approach to spoken skills across its curriculum. They will introduce Harkness Tables to their lessons. Harkness tables are used in lessons in some schools in the United States and involve discussions of roughly 12 pupils in a round table format.

Increasing exposure and participation to debate is one example of how schools are taking the initiative with this agenda.